

Christmas Eve 2009

I want to wish you all a very merry Christmas. You know, there's something amazing about Christmas Eve. Every time I walk into this historic old church I'm transported out of the busy hustle-bustle of the 21st century into a sort of timeless state. But on Christmas Eve this effect is at its most intense. Tonight, on this Christmas Eve, there is a part of me that is my nine-year-old self again, gathered around the Christmas tree with my sister, age 7, and my mom and dad -- they are both gone now -- but in my mind they are with me tonight, both young and healthy. I can see it all so clearly on this night, when **Families are gathering**: many are here tonight (we welcome you), and many of our parishioners are away visiting their families elsewhere. And some of us are here by ourselves tonight, but there is a great feeling of family in this community called the parish of Intercession. Christmas Eve is a time when families gather.

Yes, I'm carried back to my childhood on Christmas Eve when I see **Children excited** -- in anticipation of surprises, the pitter-pat of reindeer hooves.

Christmas Eve is also a time of **warmth and lights** -- warm and cozy on a cold winter's night.

And Christmas Eve is about **Carols** -- those magical vehicles we only sing a few days a year, but they not only inspire us, they also transport us to another place and time. Memories and traditions and childhoods and warm thoughts -- these things are all stirring in me tonight and maybe in you too.

All these things are hugely emotional and deeply personal -- because Christmas Eve is all about love.

Christmas is all about love. But the truth is that Christmas is a bit of an island in the midst of a world that seems too often to not be about love -- Christmas Eve is set in a world which too often seems to be about conflict, disappointment, and chaos.

Physicists say the universe is dying ... This is true. We know the universe is expanding and physicists say that this Big Bang will end in one of two ways -- either the universe will keep expanding forever, in which case everything will cool until there is no warmth or light or life anywhere. Or, physicists say that the force of gravity may cause the Big Bang at some point to reverse itself, causing the universe to rapidly implode into a fiery Big Crunch. Either way doesn't sound too good. There are some pessimistic souls who have seized on such facts as evidence that there is no God, there is no hope. In other words, they would say that everything about Christmas Eve that touches our hearts is temporary and is an illusion.

So a big question for us is: whether the common denominator, the ultimate reality, the bottom line of the universe and everything in it, including our lives today, is about chaos and decay, or is the common denominator, as Christmas suggests, about love?

Peter Atkins, a chemist and author of the freshman chemistry text that UWSP uses, is an outspoken atheist. He is not a big fan of Christmas. As he ponders the death of the universe, he writes: "The religious will increasingly have no excuse for continued belief in the existence of God but will nevertheless cling to it. Indeed, as science exposes the ultimate bleakness of the

universe -- a bleakness I find enthralling -- it is likely that humanity will cling increasingly to the false hope provided by religion ... They want comforting thoughts, not truth.”

So ... where does this little baby born tonight fit into all this? Where does Jesus fit into this?

Jesus is the answer to the question: Is **chaos and decay** the common denominator of the universe or is it **love**? Jesus says it is love. And he himself is the proof. Let me tell you more.

Tonight’s gospel tells of the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem, and an angel appeared before them. The angel said to them and says to us as well, across all the years and miles: *“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people ... for to you is born a savior.”*

There are three things I must tell you tonight about this baby Jesus, this savior born tonight, and what he means and what answers he gives us for our lives. Three things that God has done on this night.

Number 1. God has broken into the flow of history ... One day follows the previous day, events occur as a consequence of the events that preceded them. Cause and effect. We understand this, we expect this. Yet, God has shattered all that ... he stepped away from his timeless, eternal transcendence -- and entered the world, entered the flow of history. His coming wasn’t the result of anything that we were able to cause. It was entirely God’s initiative. You need to know in your life that you are not alone, twisting slowly in the wind ... because this God is not a remote God, not a hands-off God, but a God who out of love and from his own initiative has come directly into our lives and our history at a specific time in a specific place. **God has broken into the flow of history**

Number 2. God came as one of us ... One of the rather comical aspects of the 2008 election was watching all the Presidential candidates working hard to have us believe they are one of us, just ordinary folks. We saw John McCain in ordinary clothes, sleeves rolled up (ready for work), talking to Joe and Susie down at the coffee shop, listening to the guys on the assembly line; Barack Obama throwing gutter balls at the small town bowling alley; Hillary Clinton hoisting a Pabst Blue Ribbon at the local tavern. They worked hard to convince us that they relate to everything we’re going through... yet they’re all millionaires who are used to moving in elite circles like you and I have never experienced. But Jesus didn’t need to prove his credentials, he didn’t need to try to convince us that he’s one of us. Born to peasant parents, a scared teenage mother giving birth – not in a well-staffed hospital – but outside on a winter night, among farm animals. The only other people who knew about it were the shepherds, in that culture the lowest people on the economic food chain – working the night shift at minimum wage.

God did not come to us as a great equation written in the sky for only the elite to understand. He did not come to us a powerful emperor giving out a proclamation from a royal balcony for only the privileged to hear. He came as a baby, helpless and dependent, born into poverty, born into struggle, born into a society that would not understand him, a society that would reject him and his family. He came in a way that says to us: God has decided to take upon himself everything you are going through, and there is nothing about you – who you are or what you have done – that can ever separate you from his love. **God came as one of us**

Number 3. God came to save us – Okay, I have a question for you. What does your car look like today? Well, if it's like mine, it's got a thick coat of the seasonal grunge all over it. It's the result of all the snow and drizzle, the dirty slush from the road, and the muddy puddles my car has gone through the last few weeks. And the interior is a mess too, with all the mud and snow that's been tracked inside. My car looks terrible, it's a mess. Who in their right mind would want a car that looks like this? My car looks totally ruined. But I know that in due time I'll be able to spray hot soapy water all over my filthy car, and all that mud and dirt will just wash away and my car will again look brand new.

As we go through our lives, we accumulate our own fair share of spiritual and physical dirt – the snow and drizzle of disappointments, the dirty slush of our failures, the muddy puddles of struggles we've been through. And even in our interior, in our souls, we may feel like too much dirt has been tracked in. We seem totally ruined. Who in their right mind would want a person that looks like this?

And the trouble is, these things that happen in our lives are not like road grunge that we can wash away. No, these things are like scars – permanent, spiritually disfiguring, painful, humiliating.

But the angels cried out, "*I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, to you this day is born a savior.*" Not a great teacher, not an inspired religious leader, not a great moral example, but a savior. One who saves.

The bottom line is this. Through his life, his death on the cross, his rising from the grave – this Jesus, this savior, can wash all the grime away from our lives. We thought our failures and hardships were permanent scars that we would have to carry forever. God says No. His son will wash them away – just like the mud sliding off our cars when we finally flood that soapy water over it, all our broken parts are restored as he washes us clean. That's what the bible means when it says that Jesus makes all things new. That if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

So, this is what this little baby is about. He is God. A God who came into this world, breaking into history, overturning everything. A God who came into this world for all people – no special qualifications required to receive this baby, just open your arms. And he came to save us, to make us new, to restore us to our original factory condition, if you will.

This baby Jesus is the underlying reason and justification for this season, for you being here tonight, for all the warmth and emotion and love we feel at Christmas. This world it is NOT, after all, a random, chaotic place, mindless, mechanical and bleak. It is a world whose purpose and destiny is love. Jesus is the reason your Christmas joy is not a momentary illusion or fantasy in the cold hard reality of life, but rather that your Christmas joy IS the reality of life. He is why family, and memories, and traditions, and carols, and excited kids waiting for Santa, all make sense, and we are not just kidding ourselves about what life is really about. This night is all about YOU and it is all about JESUS. He is not just the reason for this season. He is the reason for every season. AMEN.